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LIBERTY AND REFORM

THE ancient Greek sophists, the stoics, Rousseau, the French humanitarians and even the Russian Bolsheviki are alike in one respect. Each failed splendidly. The source of failure is not far to seek. It lies in what I shall call *subjectivism*. And by subjectivism is meant the absence of any consciously devised machinery of organization through which ideas find expression.

The sophists in the field of ethics, logic and politics developed an excessive individualism which led to a policy of forwardness, at once bold, irritating and opportunistic. An inordinate preoccupation with the inner life is the dominant note of stoicism. To be sure the stoic boasted of a cosmopolitanism. But its basis was entirely metaphysical and subjective. A man was a citizen of the universe, not by virtue of participation in conjoint activities or the sharing of common objective interests, but because, being a fragment of divinity, he was bound to his fellows by inner spiritual ties. It should be said, however, that the cosmopolitanism of the stoics went far toward breaking down social and national barriers while its doctrine of universal brotherhood developed the feeling of spiritual kinship and helped forward the spirit of democracy and internationalism.

Rousseau's cry of "back to nature" is not an appeal to go out of doors. By nature he means subjective nature. Conventions and institutions are the barriers that hold men apart. Rousseau would recapture that state of primitive innocence before man was spoiled by society or contaminated by politics. The dominant intellectual characteristic of the eighteenth century was its spirit of optimism, an optimism at once romantic, humanitarian, and complacent. Its basis was founded on man's trust in reason as an expression of universal law and a faith in humanity as inherently good. The underlying basis of social solidarity and the principles of political unity were entirely subjective and sentimental. Liberty was a thing of ideas, feelings, literature, and art. It lacked the machinery of organization for the execution of its ideas, it had no objective basis in institutions. Men attempted to fraternize on the basis of sentiment. As a result there developed a childish romanticism and a *laissez-faire*

philosophy. Men were left free to pursue their own interests with as little outside restriction and governmental control as possible.

The Russian Bolsheviks, like the French humanitarians, are possessed of an abnormal capacity to feel. From this springs their simple-minded idealism. What they want is not governmental restraint, but opportunity for the unhampered expression of feeling.

Subjectivism ends in anarchy. This is not to denounce human nature. But it is to say that life does not contain within itself the means and agencies of its own furtherance and growth. A society which derives its cohesive forces from within must remain vacuous, unorganized, and chaotic.

Another way of viewing liberty is to present it in terms of something objective. For illustrations we turn to English history. As far back as 1215 England guaranteed liberty in the form of a written document. Here there was something objective that men could go to. Up to Milton, at least, there is no philosophical background to English political development, no recourse to abstract principles. The appeal is to definitely recorded rights and to registered precedents. Liberty was a thing of statutes and documents. The rights appealed to in the famous Petition of Rights (1628) are no abstract principles. The grievance is that the king has not kept faith with the statutes enacted. "We humbly show unto our sovereign . . . that whereas it is declared and enacted by a statute (so and so) . . . , yet nevertheless of late divers commissions ('against the tenor of the said statutes') have issued." The petition is that his Majesty be graciously pleased to serve "according to the laws and statutes of this realm." "Lest we forget" is typically British and is at the basis of English conservatism.

The emphasis to be put on the "contract" theory of government put forward by the classical British political philosophers is just this, that government is a contract, though as some one has remarked, if Hobbes or Locke had been asked to produce the contract they would have been rather hard pressed to find it.

England's trust is in her political institutions. The growth of English liberalism in the nineteenth century is almost exclusively in terms of legal reform. Witness the reform of the penal code, 1823; religious liberties granted to Protestant dissenters, 1828; the Catholic Emancipation Act, 1829; the First Reform Bill, 1832; abolition of slavery, 1833; acts regulating factory conditions begun in 1833; repeal of the Corn Laws, 1846; the Chartist Movement, 1848; the Second and Third Reform Bills, 1867 and 1884.

A similar legal conception of liberty is held by the early American political philosophers. Emphasis on Bills of Rights is too

patent to need comment. Certain liberties thought to be fundamental were formulated into propositions and put into writing for security against invasion.

Upon the illustrations just cited two observations may be made. First, liberty is viewed legally and politically. The struggle for liberty has been largely a struggle for constitutional rights and for political recognition. The era of capitalism may in a very true sense be presented as the rise of the middle-class to political power. And in an equally true sense the world-wide labor unrest is a similar struggle on the part of the proletariat to gain political influence. Whether we take the political revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries or the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, the aim has been to gain liberty through the enactment of law. Secondly, liberty as thus conceived is at bottom a negative conception. To overthrow monarchy, to smash tyranny, to beat back aggression, to throw off encumbrances, to resist oppression, these have been the aims of liberalism and democracy.

Institutions designed to resist oppression may themselves in time become oppressive. Institutions become burdensome when they are taken as ends in themselves rather than as means; they then become set forms; instead of subserving human ends, they suppress them. But that is to mistake loyalty for liberty and to put coercion in the place of control. To institutionalize life is to reduce life to mechanism and thus to preclude the possibility of development. A machine can not progress. If subjectivism failed splendidly, institutionalism has, or very nearly has, succeeded ignominiously. It is not that habit is more potent than impulse; its power lies in its superior organization. But what you gain in stability you lose in variation.

If subjectivism, lacking an objective basis of control, has been drifting toward anarchy, institutionalism, in its glorification of authority, has tended toward tyranny. What is needed is an analysis of the concept of liberty, a liberty which will be less variable than a sentiment and more human than a document. Somewhere between irresponsibility and coercion lies freedom.

Wherever there is life there is movement. If those who have written about "springs to action" would have spent five minutes looking at an amœba under a microscope they would never have made the blunders they have. There is no question about starting activity. The little animal is already acting, the problem is to keep it still. There are no springs to action, but only springs to particular kinds of activity. The "springs" are to be found in the external medium in which the activity is going on. Activity starts from within, direction is determined from without. The environment with its checks and limits solicits and directs the particular response.

We thus have two things: an inner impulse to move, and an outer determinant of direction. So far as the activity is concerned, the two phases are inseparable aspects of a single and indivisible process. Varied reaction is the original source of spontaneity. Here, if anywhere, freedom begins. At the lowest level of life there is physical restlessness, a tendency to make a variety of movements over and above the actual demands of the situation. This forward impulse finds the means of its furtherance in the environment. Activity expands, develops, takes direction, gets organized in terms of the factors of the external medium. The stimuli are invitations addressed to particular movements. They evoke or restrain, elicit or limit, encourage or check. Impulse maintains itself by extracting from the environment the means of its own conservation. In itself the impulse is loose and unorganized. It lacks "form." This deficiency is supplied by the solicitations of the environment.

The question to ask is not whether the action is free or determined, but whether it is effective. It is effective just to the extent that the factors of the environment are utilized as means of helping forward the life of the amœba. Freedom and determination are the subjective and objective aspects of a process which in itself is single and indivisible.

As life becomes more highly organized certain tendencies to action get standardized and become hereditary. These are instincts. The forward impulse here appears as a purposive impulse. A certain amount of selection is provided for in nervous preparedness. Instinctive behavior manifests the same dual character. Purposive impulse is there to begin with but it awaits a stimulus from without to arouse and develop it. The initial impulse is from within, the objective stimuli are means that direct and guide the activity toward the goal to which it is already headed. The subjective and objective phases of instinct may be illustrated by the instinct of curiosity. Curiosity exhibits a peculiar combination of alertness with caution. Alertness is the aspect of behavior viewed from the standpoint of the animal, caution is the same process viewed from the standpoint of the environment. Activity progresses with a sort of rhythmic balance between advance and retreat, wariness and readjustment, exploration and testing. Subjectively there is the impulse to try out, but each step in the experiment is checked up by what the advance reveals.

Conscious reflection involves both induction and deduction. The effective advance of a reflective experience exhibits a balance of suggestion, hypothesis, discovery on the one hand, and control, elaboration and proof on the other. We "cut" to get things into shape and

“try” to see if they fit. The inductive phase is experimental, it involves elasticity, variation, freedom; the deductive phase is regulative and involves form, stability and responsibility. A complete act of thought involves both aspects. An inductive hypothesis is tentative until confirmed, that is, until “form” is put along with “matter.” Deductive concepts are truly “forms.” To give information is to put form into what was unorganized. To give instruction is to give stability by providing structure. Deductive concepts provide the medium in which ideas develop. They do not block the thought process, they are the means through which the process is sustained.

The old dilemma between free will and determination is the result of taking the two complementary phases of a single and indivisible process and viewing them as separate processes. Induction without deduction is blind, freakish, de-formed. It leads to irresponsibility, anarchy and subjectivism. Deduction without induction is empty. Concepts become institutionalized. They operate mechanically and lead to habit, routine and intellectual coercion. No wonder a rigid deductive thinker like Spinoza combines mechanism, determination, and absolutism.

Freedom of thought means responsible and effective thinking. It is now well established that reflection takes its point of departure in a situation of confusion. Thinking is free just to the extent that concepts are utilized as means of clarification. To think is to adjust means to ends.

All psychology is social psychology. Freedom of action is entirely analogous to the types of activity illustrated in the cases of the amœba, the instinct of curiosity, and reflective thinking. Social activity exhibits a subjective and an institutional aspect. An intensification of either aspect to the neglect of the other leads either to subjectivism or institutionalism. It is the substantive and not the adjectival forms of the words that are misleading. Social liberty is to be found in a just relation between the two aspects. Justice is an ad-just-ment. Free activity and moral activity, liberty and justice are one and the same thing. This is essentially the position set forth in the ethics of Aristotle.

Life has no end beyond itself, or, as Aristotle would say, no “final” cause distinct from itself. The only end of life is to live in such a way that you can keep on living. If there is a distinction of ends, it is the distinction between living and living well. The final cause of life is the realization of its own characteristic excellence, the successful performance of its characteristic functions. The “formal” cause is the state of organization that any specific life exhibits

at any moment of its career. Matter and form are not two separate things. To separate them was the mistake of Plato. It is as if matter developed to the point where it achieved contact with form. But that is to open the way for either subjectivism or institutionalism. For Aristotle matter and form are two complementary aspects of development. Neither is form an end in itself. You do not give form to an impulse just in order that it may possess form, you do it because a formed character is more successful in the performance of its activities than a de-formed one. A well-formed character is one in which the loose natural capacities are through practise and training stabilized in the interest of well-ordered life. Activity is an end in itself, but activity must have something to act on, or as expressed by Aristotle, if activity is to be successful, the one acting must be adequately supplied with "external goods." External goods are not ends in themselves, but means only. It is thus that we speak of a man of "means," meaning that he is supplied with the necessary conditions of an enriched experience.

I have dwelt on the place and function of "form" for an obvious reason; it is to determine accurately its instrumental function. Institutions are "forms" of social organization and constitute the medium in which social life goes on. What the checks, limits and solicitations of the environment are to the activities of the amoeba, what the objective stimuli are to the instinct of curiosity, what concepts are to reflection, that institutions, conventions and forms of social organization are to community life. Both thought and action proceed within the limits and under the conditions of an institutional background.

Institutions have an instrumental value, they are means to ends, never ends in themselves. We must learn to estimate institutions by their human value. "The ulterior significance of every mode of human association," writes Professor Dewey, "lies in the contribution which it makes to the improvement of the quality of experience."¹ The qualitative excellence of experience is life's intrinsic worth. But life attains excellence only in and through external forms that provide the machinery of organization for its expression. To escape institutionalism, forms must be continually re-adapted to the changing conditions of life. To reform is literally to *re*-"form." That is, to provide new and more effective outlets for the expression of life. To reconstruct is to change things by introducing a different type of structure. Democratic reform at the present time consists in the introduction of a different structural principle of organization. It is to change democracy from a legal to a social institution.

¹ *Democracy and Education*, p. 11.

Traditionally we have started with certain abstract principles and have framed our political institutions in accordance with them. A civil right, we were told, is a natural right exchanged. These natural rights were abstractly rather than vitally conceived. It is thus that legal institutions lose their contact with life. An inquiry into the basis of natural rights would take us back to the eighteenth century conception of natural law. It is thence that our entire mechanical conception of law is derived. Legal institutions could be worked out with scientific exactitude and mathematical balance just because the underlying philosophical conception was through and through mechanical. In commenting critically on such a conception we again revert to the position of Aristotle. He did not think you could have an exact science of ethics. The facts of life were thought to be too variable and uncertain to be reduced to scientific exactitude. You can have no more *uni-form-ity* than the nature of the subject-matter allows. It was just because natural capacities were in themselves indeterminate that the statesman must undertake the task of training them. Of metaphysics, Aristotle said: "Other sciences may be more useful, but none is so excellent."² Of ethics he might have said: "Other inquiries may be more exact, but none is so human." Probability is the price we pay for our humanity.

Instead of inalienable rights and abstract principles as points of departure we must, like Aristotle, begin with natural capacities, or in terms of a more precise psychological terminology, with impulses and instincts. These original tendencies are loose and unorganized. They must be subjected to control. You control life indirectly by controlling the medium in which it expands and develops, that is, by providing an objective and institutional basis of regulation. Democracy is thus more than a form of government, politically and legally conceived. It is a way of life. A free life is one which finds in the external medium the means of its own furtherance. Freedom is self-control, that is, a combination of the subjective and institutional phases of social activity. On the subjective side, there is variation, inventiveness, spontaneity; on the institutional side, there is form, verification, stability. Democracy, we conclude, is that form of social organization in which each member of the social group is given free and full access to all the means and agencies of social growth.

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² As translated by Professor Woodbridge.